

CASA gives children a chance

September 1, 2015



The nonprofit Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children (CASA) organization is just one of many important community efforts that Los Alamos National Laboratory supports through programs like its annual Employee Giving Campaign, but CASA is unique in providing trained volunteers to advocate for abused and neglected children within the often frightening and bewildering world of the legal system.

Northern New Mexico's First Judicial District, which covers Rio Arriba, Santa Fe and Los Alamos Counties, has over 2,000 reports of child abuse and neglect every year. Of these, roughly 10 percent of the cases result in children entering foster care, because they lack reliable and safe caregivers.

"CASA volunteers within the First Judicial District advocate for over 100 foster children annually," Annie Rasquin, CASA's executive director for the First Judicial District, said.

Most likely, the children started out in biological families plagued by poverty, drug addiction and domestic violence and have suffered significant maltreatment and trauma,

including prenatal drug exposure; neglect; physical, emotional and sexual abuse; or even prostitution.

“The parents themselves probably struggled with their own histories of trauma and lack of support,” Rasquin noted. “Once in foster care, the children—and their foster parents—face an overburdened legal and child welfare system. Particularly when a child has been in several different foster settings, CASA volunteers sometimes are the only adults to caringly and consistently advocate for the vulnerable young person in and out of court.”

But Rasquin considers the children’s plight not merely a matter of individual tragedy but a public health issue that undermines the vitality and future of northern New Mexico’s communities.

“Traumatized children show more developmental challenges, underperformance in school, addiction and drug abuse, unwanted and early pregnancies, criminal behavior, unemployment and homelessness,” Rasquin explained. “They face medical problems, depression, anxiety and higher suicide rates. They also are 40 percent more likely to abuse their children once they become parents, which starts the cycle all over again.”

Meet a CASA volunteer

CASA volunteer Doreen Sansom believes that the right interventions at the right time can make a huge difference for both foster children and their caregivers, no matter what the outcome may be for the children’s permanent placement.

Sansom remembers an almost four-year-old boy, for instance, for whom the child welfare system’s customary child development assessment kept being postponed despite the fact that he had difficulty speaking clearly and coherently enough to make himself be understood. After Sansom pointed out the delays during a court hearing, the testing date was set within two weeks.

Because the subsequent development assessment ended up not classifying the boy as having a developmental communication delay of at least 30 percent, he did not qualify for state-provided speech therapy services. Sansom repeatedly had to contact the boy’s school and the school superintendent for special education before the boy was able to be retested.

The second development assessment did show significant developmental delay for the boy in the communication area, but he was nearly five before the speech therapy finally began.

“I ran into the boy’s grandmother the other day, who is now his adoptive parent,” Sansom said. “Fortunately the boy is communicating quite effectively at this point.”

When well-meaning people ask Sansom why she would want to donate her time and energy to abuse-and-neglect cases, especially during her retirement years, she has a prompt and honest answer: “I want to give back to the community and be part of the solution.”

As a former social worker and successful parent Sansom brings a lot of expertise to her CASA contributions, but CASA volunteers come from all backgrounds and walks of life, and some still have full-time jobs.

“We all have different strengths,” Sansom explained. “In my case, I really did not know very much about the legal system, but CASA’s thorough training program and experience in court addressed that.”

To Sansom, what is much more important than any initial gaps is a genuine interest in wanting to help children, families and communities; a willingness to consider all perspectives without taking sides; a compassionate voice so that each child’s best interests and needs can be met; and a lot of patience and persistence.

To learn more about the Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children effort, visit northern New Mexico’s [CASA – First Judicial District](#) website, call (505) 820-1500 or go to the national [CASA](#) page. If you are interested in becoming a CASA volunteer, the [CASA FAQs](#) are a good start.

Community Connections features news and opportunities that grow out of the Laboratory’s Good Neighbor Pledge: “To partner with our neighbors on strengthening math and science learning, diversifying the economy and expanding community giving in northern New Mexico.”

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